

VZCZCXYZ0011  
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHRH #7193/01 2560507  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 130507Z SEP 06  
FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1461  
INFO RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH 7713

C O N F I D E N T I A L RIYADH 007193

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/12/2016  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KISL](#) [KWMN](#)  
SUBJECT: PROPOSED CHANGE IN WOMEN'S PRAYER AREA IN MECCA  
SPARKS CONTROVERSY

Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission David Rundell  
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The General Presidency for the Two Holy Mosques Affairs issued a proposal on August 25 for shifting the prayer place of women within the circumambulation area -- the uncovered circle surrounding the Kaaba ("House of God"), which is called the mataf-- in the Grand Mosque of Mecca. Moving this prayer area to two larger spaces far away from the Kaaba would prevent women from easily performing tawaf-- the prayers required as part of the five pillars of Islam. Female scholars and worshippers alike broadly condemned the proposal, which named increased television broadcasting as one of the reasons for the shift. They dismissed the move as unacceptable and biased against women. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) On August 25, the General Presidency for the Two Holy Mosques Affairs issued a widely-published proposal to remove the female section of the Grand Mosque from the mataf -- the uncovered circle surrounding the Kaaba ("House of God") -- to a different area entirely. Over the past few years, the female section of the mataf has been the subject of much debate, but no action had previously been taken. The proposal, which ignored the need for women to be able to perform tawaf -- the prayers required as part of the five pillars of Islam -- was developed to address overcrowding, the need for privacy for women during prayer, and the desire for wider television coverage. (Note: It is considered un-Islamic by many religious scholars in the Kingdom for women to be photographed or videotaped. As such, the weekly broadcast of the Friday Sermons from the Grand Mosque has been limited in scope. Many viewers have commented that they would like more "fantastic television coverage" of the Grand Mosque during sermons. End Note.)

¶3. (C) BACKGROUND: Performing the pilgrimage to the Kaaba has traditionally been done, even in pre-Islamic times, by women and men together. There is no instruction either in the Quran or in the Prophet Mohammed's teachings indicating that segregation of men and women is necessary or warranted. The Wahhabi sect of Islam tends to liberally impose segregation of the sexes-- often times does so in seeming opposition to the spirit and traditions of Islam. END BACKGROUND.

¶4. (U) Overcrowding in the Grand Mosque has been a point of contention for many years because the space allocated for women in the mataf is considerably smaller than the space allocated for men. Additionally, there are already several areas that are "off-limits" to women in the Grand Mosque, which forces all women to be confined to these new, relatively small designated spaces. The proposal aimed to increase prayer room for men by removing the women's area entirely, as well as to expand television coverage for the public.

¶5. (U) Many female religious scholars dispute the actual

purpose of the proposal. Writer and historian Hatun al-Fasi publicly stated that the proposal contradicts the spirit and message of Islam, which treats both men and women equally. She said, "I strongly reject this proposal and request the authorities not to implement it." This sentiment has been reiterated in several mainstream op-ed pieces, with women contributors commenting that Islam does not give preference to men in following the five pillars of the faith, therefore, the General Presidency should not either. Safiya Ali, an expatriate religious activist, stated that she feared that once the current female mataf area shifted, women would no longer have the chance to pray close to the holy Kaaba.

¶16. (C) Saudi interlocutors reported to EmbOffs that they fear expanded authority of the General Presidency over Mecca and Medina should this proposal be accepted. One contact stated, "if it is left to them (the General Presidency), they would go as far as dividing the Grand Mosque into two and totally segregate men from women." Several interlocutors expressed concern that this proposal reflects the strict Wahhabi orientation of the General Presidency, whose sheikhs largely hail from Qassim, arguably the most conservative province in the Kingdom.

¶17. (C) Although male religious scholars also publicly commented on the proposal with mixed reviews, their focus generally remained negatively tainted. International Fiqh Academy expert Hassan Misfer called mosque authorities to allocate special areas for women to perform tawaf. However, he also said that he feared the Western media would use the new proposal to support allegations that the Kingdom discriminates against women.

¶18. (C) COMMENT: The nature of the proposal to remove women from the mataf exemplifies the strict control that Wahhabi

sheikhs continue to have over religious institutions in the Kingdom, as well as their focus on segregation of men and women as an overarching priority. The discrimination posited by this proposal imposes on women's right to perform tawaf, as well as the family's ability to perform together the Hajj and Umra, which is a long-standing Muslim tradition. Both conservative and liberal women alike have expressed outrage at this proposal, and it is likely that, if it is implemented, Muslims worldwide will publicly vocalize their dissatisfaction. Additionally, the fact that male scholars support this proposal and fear the response of the Western media goes to the heart of the issue at hand. If Saudi men do not think it appropriate for there to exist equal opportunity for males and females even for prayer -- the very core of Saudi society -- then it will most certainly be difficult to institutionalize reforms in other areas that would impact Saudi women. END COMMENT.  
OBERWETTER